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City parks are for people

By Chester E. Smolski

It has been claimed that urban parks are "the lungs of the city", supplying, as they do, breathing space in a harsh concrete and asphalt environment. Parks also provide a sense of nature with trees, grass, and flowers in a serene and peaceful setting.

All ages of people need urban open spaces which can afford safe areas for children, quiet places where young people can unobtrusively hold hands, and pleasant surroundings where old people may sit and chat.

Downtown open spaces need to be attractive and inviting so that passersby may stop for awhile to enjoy a floral display, to rest under the shade of a tree, or just to watch the passing parade of people.

Such parks are to be found throughout the lovely, 2,000 year-old city of London which Peter Hall claims to be the airiest and least oppressive, and in the summer, greenest great city in the world. Not only a mammoth Hyde Park but a minute Golden Park, one block north of Piccadilly, are just two of the hundreds of parks which comprise 15 percent of Inner London, as compared with the less than two percent of green space in central Providence.

William Whyte, in his research on open space in Manhattan, contends that parks get their greatest use when people can easily look into them and people in the park can readily look out. "People watching" is a major attraction of downtowns, and parks can be made to facilitate this form of activity. This openness of parks also supplies a measure of security which, in today's world, must be a prime consideration. These are lessons to be learned in the construction of these necessary open spaces in city centers.

In Providence, two new parks which present a sharp contrast in their potential for people use have appeared on the scene. The recently dedicated Garibaldi Park at the head of Federal Hill, although not directly in the downtown, is close enough

for center city users to avail themselves of this delightful park. The new park on Empire Street, part of the Weybosset Hill development, is in use, although not yet officially open.

Both of these parks are approximately three-quarters of an acre in size and provide seats for 50 to 60 people, but there, the similarity ends. Garibaldi Park is partially rimmed by attractive hitching posts, enclosed by streets, and has low

Parks are for people — Empire Park has lost sight of this fact

buildings on three sides, yet there is the impression of space. From this high point of land, one can view the state Capitol, cars speeding along Route 95, buildings in the downtown and, most important, people walking by. The single, large elm provides a sense of identity to this bit of open space dominated by grass.

Selected plantings, including a few small flower gardens, and wooden benches along the winding pathways serve as a backdrop for the twin flagpoles at the park entrance. To its advantage, houses to the east and west, together with the Bradford House on the south, keep the park under constant surveillance. One evening, three elderly men were sitting and chatting on a bench in the unlighted park. Interestingly, a recent check revealed that none of the ten lights spaced throughout the park was broken.

The downtown location of the Empire Street park would appear to offer a greater potential for people use, as witness the architectural employment of tiles under foot rather than grass. The 35 tree plantings will provide shade in time while the circular flower garden and the tum-

bling waters on the west wall provide some interesting diversity.

But one can question and even criticize the lack of people-attractors. All seats are located only on the periphery, along the high brick wall which almost surrounds the park, with none located under the trees or arranged for conversation. Individual concrete blocks serving as seats, while interesting from an architectural point of view, are cold, damp, and not conducive for sitting or long conversations.

The Empire Street site is difficult. A parking lot to the north is obscured by a high brick wall with trees on the outside; the eight-story telephone building blocks the view to the west; the park opens to the south on to the Jackson Walkway and the Blue Cross building; and, finally, the wall facing east precludes the view on to Empire Street, except at one small opening.

Admittedly, the site required some barrier to the east because of the ground sloping to the street, and the brick wall does blend well with the surrounding buildings, but it is virtually impossible to see people on Empire Street when sitting in the park. From the outside the six-foot high wall prevents passersby from looking into the park.

Not only does this wall preclude the inviting look of a park (you can walk by and not know the park exists) but it also raises the spectre of security. Recent adverse publicity indicates that questions are being raised about this point. A current count indicated that ten of the light globes were broken, adding substance to early criticisms of the wall.

Cities are for people and so are parks. Garibaldi Park has this kind of human focus while the Empire park has lost sight of this fact in its attempt to architecturally satisfy a basic city need—usable parks in the downtown, and this is its failing.

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